



**TO: Planning and Economic Development
Committee (PED)**

DATE: May 5, 2006

FROM: Gary Jackson, City Manager

**PREPARED BY:
Shannon Tuch**

**SUBJECT: Plan Coordination and
Compliance Efforts**

Background

In early 2005, the Development Services Task Force compiled a number of recommendations to help coordinate and facilitate the review and implementation of large-scale development projects. In response to these recommendations, City staff organized a Development Review Team with representatives from the various technical departments. These representatives met regularly to examine the City's current development review processes, identify opportunities for improvement, and develop an alternative process to implement those improvements.

In development of this new process, it became increasingly apparent that good process would have to include improved coordination and communication. Recent breakdowns in communication have resulted in serious non-compliance issues as well as serious misinformation in a number of active development projects. As regrettable as the events have been, a positive outcome has been that these events have provided staff the unusual opportunity to examine the specific causes of miscommunication and identify possible mitigating measures that can facilitate compliant and cooperative development in the City of Asheville.

Implementation

For the last several months, staff has been testing and incorporating changes into the current development review process for larger scaled (TRC level) projects. These changes have focused on two primary aspects of the review and permitting process:

- Communication
- Quality Control

Improving Communication

The first aspect, improving communication, can be looked at from two points of view: improving communication externally with the public and improving communication internally between technical departments. Whether the communication is internal or external, both directions of communication benefit from having an individual coordinator to contact for assistance; the coordinator will act both as a manager of the process but will also act as a resource that can be contacted by other staff and the public equally. Another mutual benefit is the development of a project tracking system utilizing existing resources that can record and communicate review comments, estimated completion dates, and census information not available previously. This system utilizes existing resources minimizing the learning curve for staff while providing an easy to use and access internet based system for the public.

In addition to the mutual benefits, there were measures designed for improved communication to the two separate populations. When considering communicating with the public, a resonating theme appeared to be the need to establish clear expectations. Most individuals from the development community who were polled did not express significant concern over complying with City standards but instead expressed frustration with not understanding what was necessary for compliance or their role in the overall process. To establish clear expectations from the outset, staff has created a formal "pre-application process" where the development proposal is discussed and staff assesses what documentation is necessary for a thorough and comprehensive review depending on the particular aspects of the project. The applicant then receives a form detailing exactly which information needs to be included in a formal submittal and a checklist for each separate sheet of that submittal. A flow chart has also been created for each separate type of application graphically illustrating the review process unique to that type of application. In addition, staff has added to the

list of services provided to the development community by providing the opportunity for an applicant to conduct a pre-application, pre-construction, and post-construction meeting(s) with the relevant technical staff to facilitate a common understanding. Lastly, a bi-monthly formal Technical Review Committee (TRC) meeting schedule has been established to facilitate turn-around times and provide more rapid feedback to the development community.

Improving communication between technical departments also deals largely with understanding and expectations. Staff similarly suffers from confusion over what is expected when reviewing plans for their specific compliance issues, particularly when having to switch between operating as a group such as the Technical Review Committee, and operating as an individual when reviewing plans alone at their desks. In response, staff is in the midst of developing a list of responsibilities assigned to each individual department and a standard protocol for processing and approving plans; this protocol becomes particularly detailed when dealing with revisions to already approved plans and the subsequent communication of those revisions to other affected departments and inspectors. Creating additional sign-off steps in the new tracking system could also be used to help communicate between departments that individuals have completed their reviews and have signed off accordingly. Improved communication between technical departments becomes particularly critical when considering the second aspect of the review and permitting process, quality control.

Improving Quality Control

It goes without saying that improving communication will contribute to a better (or quality) product; however, there is a fundamental element to quality control that is often overlooked, and that is “control”. It was identified early on in this process that to improve development review and permitting would require maintaining control over the product coming in to be reviewed, as well as the product that was leaving approved. The first step was to route all incoming materials straight to those who could review the submittals for completeness. The former process routed much of this information to individuals who were not trained in plan review and who were not able to identify those plans or applications that were grossly insufficient. Allowing insufficient submittals through the gate burdens reviewers with trying to guess at information not supplied or forces them to perform research that should have been supplied with the submittal. Contributing to this inefficiency is the practice of approving plans “with conditions” which affords the applicant a false sense of approval and completion, forcing staff to chase down necessary revisions. Reducing the number of revisions required after approval would also reduce the need for coordinating revisions with other departments, thereby reducing the opportunity for oversight. Once plans are routed to the proper staff, it will become much easier to review submittals for completeness and educate those who submitted incomplete or insufficient applications. With the quality of submittals being improved, our expectation is that the number of projects that are “approved with conditions” would be reduced while the number of unconditioned approvals would be increased.

Focusing on quality control and reducing the opportunity for oversight led staff to require that all site plans be submitted simultaneously. This is the predominant practice in other mid to large sized municipalities but a somewhat new concept in Asheville. The common review practice in Asheville was to follow a linear permitting process, requiring the review and approval of one plan before reviewing and approving the next. Proposing to submit all site plans at one time to be reviewed simultaneously would allow reviewers the opportunity to coordinate their requirements and identify potential conflicts early on in the review process and avoid those conflicts in the field. This practice does require the applicant to submit more information up-front with the initial submittal but has generally been found to save time (and money) over the long run. It should be noted that this form of a bundled detailed review would not be required of those projects moving through the public hearing process and that flexibility to allow certain construction practices to be initiated early on, such as grading, could be accommodated.

All of these practices facilitate maintaining an approved set of plans. By requiring that all contractors keep a copy of the approved set of plans on site and that all inspectors work from a copy of the same approved set of plans will help ensure that the finished product conforms to what was approved.

Other Considerations

The amount of building activity in the City of Asheville continues to grow. As a result, it is becoming increasingly urgent that we improve the efficiency of our reviews when resources remain limited. Of equal concern is improving the quality of service to the public and to each other, working together to improve the quality of life here in Asheville. The focus of this report has been on working with our development community to ensure a coordinated development review and permitting effort, resulting in a compliant product. There are other means of accomplishing compliance through monitoring, fines, and enforcement

actions which being (arguably) effective, are significantly more costly with respect to resources.

SUMMARY

I. Communication

A. To the Public (owner, design professional, contractor, neighbor)

- Establishing clear expectations (pre-applications, checklists, flow-charts)
- Tracking system
- Creation of a coordinator position (single point of contact)
- New services offered (pre-application with all TRC members, 2 formal meetings per month, pre-construction meetings, post-construction meetings)

B. Between technical departments

- Clear assignment of individual and group responsibilities
- Create standard protocol for review and tracking (particularly for revisions)
- Creation of a coordinator position (manages process)

II. Quality control

- Submittals to proper staff
- Quality control over submittals
- Bundling site permits (coordinated review)
- Maintaining “approved” sets of plans